

Covid-19 Pandemic: An Experience from Tanzania

Disclaimer: I am a PhD candidate at the University of Perugia, Italy. Prior to starting PhD studies, I was working with the Prime Minister's Office in Tanzania. I am sharing my insights on how the government of United Republic of Tanzania responded to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The first Covid-19 case in Tanzania was officially announced on 16 March, which called for the two governments – the Government of United Republic of Tanzania (URT) in collaboration with the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar¹ (RGoZ) – to come up with measures to intervene. Health-related issues are not among the Union matters; each government is independently responsible to deal with these under the existing governance structure. However, due to its nature, there was a need for the two governments to collaborate as it was considered a national disaster, which then falls under the jurisdiction of the President of the Union government. Thus, the Government of Tanzania formed a National Task Force, led by the Prime Minister's Office, to develop a multi-sectoral national Covid-19 response plan to control the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Upon confirmation of the first, single Covid-19 case, the Government of Tanzania straightaway imposed several [preventive and preparedness measures](#). Disaster committees – like the National Task Force – have structures at national, regional, district and village level in the country, which have been established by the Disaster Management Act of 2015, for the purpose of coordinating disaster management within the area of their jurisdictions.

The National Operational Guidelines for Disaster Management has been applied in the past to respond to epidemics including cholera, rift valley fever, bird flu and swine flu. It lays out clearly that epidemics of communicable diseases health-related emergencies and disasters need to be addressed by the Health Emergency and Disaster Preparedness and Response Section in the health ministry (URT, 2014). The Covid-19 pandemic was treated in the same manner due to its impacts on the economy, the extreme limitations on social interaction that are recommended as mitigation measures, high levels of illness that devastate inadequate healthcare capacity and

¹ This is a devolved administration, which exercises its jurisdiction over all domestic matters in Zanzibar and non-Union matters while URT is the Union government that exercises its jurisdiction over Union matters and all matters that deal with Tanzania Mainland.

a spike in mortality. Thus, the health ministry was working hand-in-hand with the Prime Minister's Office in responding to the pandemic.

Through these institutional arrangements, the government introduced a number of measures: banning public events and community gatherings; postponing schedules for sports and games; restricting assemblies and other large congregations; and closing all education institutions. Also, social distancing, face masks and sanitary habits were highly encouraged and enforced by the government. These measures were imposed by the central government directly without any consultation with other organs and/or relevant stakeholders, like Parliament or local governments' councils, due to the mandate having been provided by the Constitution and other relevant laws of the land. Thus, the general public and other stakeholders were called to adhere to these measures, and not to challenge them in any case.

In the spirit of national solidarity, businesses, corporates and individuals were [called to support government's efforts](#) to combat the virus. This was based on the understanding that including the private sector in disaster management reduces risks and duplication of efforts, especially in an environment where coordination is weak. For instance, it was revealed that the government, through its partners including civil society organisations, had [received donations of medical supplies, technological gadgets and cash money](#) in the efforts toward combating Covid-19.

The coronavirus had become a global health crisis. Unlike a generalized pandemic, Covid-19 created devastating social, economic and political crises that left deep scars. Countries around the world have had to come up with stringent measures to minimise the short-, medium- and long-term effects of the pandemic. But in the Tanzanian case, the government *revoked* the initial restrictions, and formulated guidelines for mandatory quarantine, mandatory testing, health service provision and management of social services provision and social activities. These guidelines were not strictly enforced and were a way to 'perform' compliance to international standards for tourists coming into the country, and for truck drivers and others needing to cross regional borders. They also offset the Tanzanian President's outright denial of the severity of the health crisis. Indeed, it was handled [more like a national security crisis](#).

In the region, the Tanzanian government [implemented less stringent responses](#) compared to neighbouring countries, especially after confirmation of the first case in the country. Neighbours like Rwanda opted for total lockdown and others, a shutdown of economic activities with national curfews (Kenya & Uganda). But in Tanzania, apart from measures mentioned above, it only [suspended international travel and introduced a mandatory 14-day quarantine](#) at the point of entry in government facilities.

Before the first case was confirmed, Tanzania's President John Magufuli, with support from prominent religious leaders, assured citizens that the Covid-19 virus could not reach the country – but he cautioned the public to take necessary precautions. Then, when the virus did in fact reach the country, efforts were only directed to education sectors and a few other areas, especially those involving mass gatherings, but excluding marketplaces. This lax stance made

people reluctant to observe social distancing, wear masks or maintain sanitary habits. There was a small window at the beginning of the outbreak when rumours on social media about people dying suddenly, raised panic in the population. On top of that, Covid-19 burials were taking place at night until proper regulations were put in place. During this period, many people followed the precautionary measures out of fear, but soon relaxed again, taking the President's lead.

Interestingly, while few considered masks as being obligatory, handwashing was widely accepted, even in rural areas. Guidelines required public places like shops to have water dispensers and soap for sanitary care, and in Dar es Salaam and other big cities, these measures were largely observed.

Assessing the actual number of Covid-19 cases in Tanzania has been more difficult than in other countries. The requests of the World Health Organization (WHO) to release data on infections have not been met by the Tanzanian authorities, with [great contestation of the data released by the government](#) by opposition parties. The last updated statistics from the government were released on *29th April 2020*, reflecting [509 total cases, 128 recoveries and 21 deaths](#).

In June, President Magufuli [declared the country 'coronavirus-free'](#) thanks to the citizens' prayers. The President was quoted declaring to churchgoers in the capital, Dodoma, that 'the corona disease has been eliminated thanks to God'. These remarks were welcomed with applause and celebratory ululation. The President [also commended the congregation for not wearing any protective gear](#) like masks. After this and other similar statements, the government lifted bans on international flights – to revive tourism – public events and community gatherings, sports and games, and assemblies and other large congregations. And education institutions were reopened. As mentioned earlier, the government's decision was backed by [toothless guidelines](#) that effectively put in place social distancing and sanitation policies.

Ostensibly, the fight against novel coronavirus requires participation and engagement of diverse stakeholders including both loyalists and critics and thus the government must be open and transparent. By contrast, the Tanzanian President ['framed Covid-19 as a war and not a health calamity requiring scientific consultation'](#). This was after he [rejected imported test-kits](#) as being faulty when it was found at the National Lab that some of them returned positive results on samples taken from pawpaw, oil and even a goat. These findings paved the way for a perception that there were imperialists behind the Covid-19 pandemic, and that it was not a real health emergency. Since it was declared by the President, no one was able to verify these claims. Had someone wanted to follow up on them, it would have proved impossible against the President's armour of popular support.

The use of local and home remedies such as drinking ginger and lemon tea, and steam therapy to prevent infection was highly [promoted by the President](#). But according to the existing body of research, steam therapy has [not been scientifically proven](#) to be effective against Covid-19.

Even now, it is widely believed by Tanzanians that home remedies and prayers play a significant role in the fight against Covid-19, and almost every household uses them.

On the other hand, various leaders of opposition parties raised concerns about how the government handled the issue. Freeman Aikaeli Mbowe, the National Chairman of the *Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo* (CHADEMA, Party of Democracy and Development) [called for the two-week self-quarantine of members of Parliament \(MPs\)](#), after the death of three MPs within a period of 11 days. He also advised the ruling party to come up with ‘emergency measures [...] to slow down the rate of infection and at the same time save the lives of Tanzanians including among others instituting a lockdown in high-risk areas and allocate increased resources to the health sector’. The [same sentiments were aired by Zitto Zuberi Kabwe](#), leader of the Alliance for Change and Transparency (ACT), who called for detailed statistics based on various governance structures, and daily government briefings that would allow questions from the media. The opposition leaders were referencing measures being carried out in other countries. However, government’s supporters accused them of being used by ‘their imperial masters’, though none were openly mentioned.

Apart from political parties, non-governmental organisations in the country also raised concerns about government responses to Covid-19. Twaweza (We Can), a Dar es Salaam-based civil society organization, issued a [statement cautioning governments](#) about ‘abat[ing] parliamentary oversight and other vital checks and balances, remov[ing] key watchdog officials, introducing aggressive censorship and putting pressure on journalists, and introduc[ing] intrusive and potentially permanent digital surveillance regimes’. The statement insisted that governments should publish consistent information about Covid-19, including among others, situational data, analytical models and scientific findings, and enhance access to information; and by doing so, safeguard or even resuscitate trust, democracy, and open and inclusive governance. Long debates erupted on social media platforms, with resistance mainly from government supporters, who even called for rallies and demonstrations. The subsequent introduction of an intrusive digital surveillance regime, precisely as cautioned by Twaweza, led to the government, through Tanzania Communication Regulatory Authority (TCRA), [suspending media outlets in the country](#). TCRA, through its Content Committee, suspended [Kwanza Online TV for 11 months](#) for allegedly ‘generating and disseminating biased, misleading and disruptive content’. This came after the reputable web-based channel posted a US embassy health alert on Instagram about the failure of the government to publish any Covid-19 figures since 29 April. A similar case involved a [newspaper outlet that was banned from producing online content](#) for 6 months, for posting a video of John Magufuli in a fish market during the pandemic.

At the time of writing, most countries outside Africa are opening up, while very few countries on the continent have eased their restrictions, including Tanzania. Thus, there is a need to capitalise on the few available opportunities to revive our economies through sectors that can generate forex tourism and inter-country trading being among them. Though it was declared that Tanzania is coronavirus free, on several occasions, government leaders have continued to

insist that the public take precautions against coronavirus because it is still in the country, though at low levels. Most Tanzanians seem to believe that there is no longer Covid-19 and hence, these precautions are not observed. In my experience, returnees from Covid-19 prone countries are neither traced nor considered to be possible asymptomatic carriers. It seems that Tanzanians will continue to live with the virus without ever measuring or acknowledging the extent of its impact on the country.

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Further Readings:

[Chen, Z., Cao, C. & Tang, F. \(2020\). Coordinated multi-sectoral efforts needed to address the COVID-19 pandemic: lessons from China and the United States. *Global Health Research and Policy* 5:22.](#)

Erasmus, G. & Hartzenberg, T. (2020). Governance in abnormal times – dealing with COVID-19: A regional perspective from South Africa. tralac Working Paper No. US20WP01/2020. Stellenbosch: tralac

[Hartley, K & Jarvis, D.S.L. \(2020\). Policymaking in a low-trust state: legitimacy, state capacity, and responses to COVID-19 in Hong Kong. *Policy and Society*, 39:3, 403-423.](#)

[Izobo, M. & Abiodun, F. \(2020, June 23\). *Enforcement of lockdown regulations and law enforcement brutality in Nigeria and South Africa.*](#)

[Kapapelo, E. \(2020, April 08\). *Democracy in times of COVID-19: a time for introspection?*](#)

[Lucero-Prisno, D.E, Adebisi, Y.A. & Lin, X. \(2020\). Current efforts and challenges facing responses to 2019-nCoV in Africa. *Global Health Research and Policy*, 5:21.](#)

[Ngalwana, V.S.C. \(2020, May 02\). *Do Covid-19 regulations pass the constitutionality test in SA?*](#)

[Telesetsky, A. \(2020\). International Governance of Global Health Pandemics. *ASIL Insights*, 3:24.](#)